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ABSTRACT

The Anglo-American Imagist movement, begun in England by Ezra Pound in 1909 and flourishing through 1918, claimed to have drawn inspiration from Chinese and Japanese poetic forms. The promoters of Imagism, which included Hilda Doolittle, John Gould Fletcher, Richard Aldington, and later, Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams, were attempting to challenge what they considered the superficially decorative and overly verbose poetry of the accepted 19th century canon. In doing so, they turned to what they considered "purer" forms of poetry in the images and simplicity of Chinese and Japanese lyric verse. Compiling a manifesto of Imagism's aims, these poets planned exclusively to write clear, effective, and concise verse according to their understanding of the Chinese and Japanese classical traditions, with exact rendition of detail, producing poetry that was a concentrated expression of mood and image. Their goal was "to present an image" (hence the name, Imagist). At first glance, it seems plausible to connect the Imagist movement with the Chinese tradition, especially with the concentration on natural imagery. But is the connection valid? This paper argues that the Imagists to a large extent misunderstood the Chinese traditions they claimed to appropriate. According to the paper, such questions are particularly stimulating when raised in the linguistic and cultural milieu of the literature classroom in an international setting. (Contains 16 notes and 15 references.) (NKA)

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by Whitney C. Dilley

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Ezra Pound and Chinese Poetics: Teaching Anglo-American Imagist Poetry

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The Anglo-American Imagist movement, begun in England by Ezra Pound in 1909 and flourishing through 1918, claimed to have drawn inspiration from Chinese and Japanese poetic forms. The promoters of Imagism, who included Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), John Gould Fletcher, Richard Aldington, and later, Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams, were attempting to challenge what they considered the superficially decorative and overly verbose poetry of the accepted nineteenth century canon. In doing so, they turned to what they considered "purer" forms of poetry in the images and simplicity of Chinese and Japanese lyric verse. Compiling a manifesto of Imagism's aims, these poets planned exclusively to write clear, effective, and concise verse according to their understanding of the Chinese and Japanese classical traditions, with exact rendition of detail, producing poetry that was a concentrated expression of mood and image. Their goal was "to present an image (hence the name, imagist)...we are not a school of painters, but we believe poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous."

At first glance, it seems plausible to connect the Imagist movement with the Chinese tradition, especially with the concentration on natural imagery generally associated with Chinese poetry. But is the connection valid? While the Imagist poets themselves claimed to have been influenced by Chinese poetics, I will argue in this paper that the Imagists to a large extent misunderstood the Chinese traditions they claimed to appropriate. Such questions are particularly stimulating when raised in the linguistic and cultural milieu of the literature classroom in an international setting.

The Anglo-American Imagist movement was an experimental literary movement which began in 1909 and flourished through 1918, guided chiefly by estranged American poet Ezra Pound, in conjunction with Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), John Gould Fletcher, Richard Aldington, F. S. Flint, and later, Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams.[1] The exponents of Imagism espoused the anti-romantic ideas of British intellectual Thomas E. Hulme in revolt against the careless thinking and superficiality of the Victorian romantic poets. In addition, the Imagist poets also claimed to have drawn inspiration from Chinese poetry. It is this claim which the following essay challenges. By pinpointing both the misappropriation of the Chinese language and Chinese poetics by Pound and his compatriots, while also examining in detail the self-stated aims of the Imagist poets, a case can clearly be made that the two traditions are not linked as closely as they first appear. Teaching twentieth-century Anglo-American Imagist poetry in the international setting of Asia thus becomes an interesting experiment in comparative literature.

In the book *In the Arresting Eye*, a discussion of the rhetoric of Imagism, John Gould Fletcher notes that for two decades preceding the Imagist movement, a significant revival of interest in Oriental literature was taking place. Alluding to the appeal of the Chinese and Japanese poetic traditions, Fletcher writes: "It seemed to me that all English poets, from Shelley to Wordsworth onward, had tried too hard to make poetry teach something, preach something, bear the abstract connotation of a general moral lesson--when the real business of poetry was to state, and state concretely, just what had moved the poet, and to leave the reader to draw his own conclusion."[2] Fletcher credited Chinese poets with achieving freedom this didacticism. Ezra Pound, leader of the Imagist movement until 1914, was fascinated by the Chinese language and writing system. He wrote in *The ABC of Reading*: "The

maximum of phanopoeia (throwing an image on the mind) is probably reached by the Chinese, due in part to their particular kind of written language."[3]

Pound and the other Imagists were the proponents of a movement that seemed to reach across language and cultural barriers to bring a marriage of the Western and Eastern poetic traditions. Pound's romantic notions of the Chinese "image" encapsulated by the ideogram (or Chinese character) and the linguistic importance of the Chinese written character in place of the western alphabetic word led him, and the other Imagists, to the conclusion that Chinese poetry was effective simply as a brief and concise presentation of "images" or pictures. This was partly due to the earliest available Western translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry which, on the printed page, grouped words in twos and threes with large amounts of white space in between. Chinese poetry thus came across as merely a series of images.

Literary historians agree that the quintessential Imagist poem is Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," written in 1916. This work is an obvious attempt to recreate the resonance of a Chinese poem or a Japanese haiku. The original text of this poem was thirty lines, but Pound reputedly distilled it from thirty lines down to two:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.[4]

Clearly in this piece, Pound was consciously imitating the "Oriental" style. Even the image itself, "petals on a wet, black bough," suggests Chinese or Japanese-style painting. But how does this poem relate to the Chinese poetic tradition? Admittedly, this poem does recall the Chinese poetic technique of juxtaposing a scene from the human world with an image from the natural world. Yet the poem breaks Chinese convention by using a modern image that is too harsh--an underground subway station. Pound places an image of mundane daily life in the West with a muted image of cool beauty and tranquillity from the East. In doing so, his poem does call to mind associations with Chinese poetry--yet only in a superficial way. This is deliberate on Pound's part--it adds to the exoticism of Pound's poem and gives more weight to what could be interpreted as a trivial piece.

If we take a closer look at the poetry of the Imagists, we find fewer and fewer continuities with the Chinese tradition. In fact, the Imagists' own work calls into question to what extent they truly understood the source they claimed to draw from. For example, existing translations of Chinese poems by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell display clear evidence of mistakes made by the Imagist poets in treating Chinese materials. Both Pound and Lowell misunderstood the visual aspect of Chinese poetry, attributing far more power to the written character to convey a picture than is actually warranted. Pound, misguided by Ernest Fenellosa's translated materials (of which he gained possession in 1913),[5] mistakenly concluded that the Chinese character could be treated as a picture, and incorrectly split Chinese characters into their separate visual elements. His misconceptions about Chinese ideograms are well-documented.[6] In *The ABC of Reading*, he observes:

> The Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of the *thing*....it *means* the thing or the action or quality germane to the several things that it pictures.[7]

Pound also includes a personal anecdote further down the page:

> Gaudier Brzeska, who was accustomed to looking at the real shape of things, could read a certain amount of Chinese without ANY STUDY. He said, "Of course you can see it's a horse" (or a wing or whatever).[8]

Pound's first statement is less than accurate; his second is a brazen falsehood.

A. C. Graham notes in his preface to *Poems of the Late T'ang* that Amy Lowell also "resorted to character-splitting."[9] In one poem, for the phrase "a dog barks," her translation of the Chinese character *fei* (containing a "dog" radical and a "mouth" radical) needlessly repeats the word "dog:"

> A dog, a dog barking.[10]

Here we can see clear evidence that Pound and Lowell misunderstood the Chinese tradition, and the Chinese poets' use of characters and image.

For a comparative study, it is necessary to understand the Imagist's self-stated aims for their school of poetics. An effective method for gauging the Chinese influence on Imagist poetics is to test actual Chinese poems "against" the six Imagist principles outlined by the imagists themselves. The Imagist credo appeared in the 1915 anthology *Des Imagistes*, and stated the following six principles:

> 1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the *exact* word, not the nearly-exact, or merely decorative word.
> 2. To create new rhythms--as the expression of new moods (e.g. free verse).
> 3. To allow for absolute freedom in the choice of subject.
> 4. To present an image (hence the name, imagist). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous.
> 5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
> 6. Finally,...concentration is of the very essence in poetry.[11]

To understand the relationship between these six principles and Chinese poetry, one can carry out a thoughtful experiment in comparative literature. Two poems by the T'ang dynasty poet Tu Fu will now be examined in order to determine how, if at all, they relate to these six Imagist principles:

Autumn Meditation #7

> K'un-ming Pool was the Han time's monument,
> The banners of the Emperor Wu are here before my eyes.
> Vega threads her loom in vain by night under the moon,
> And the great stone fish's plated scales veer in the autumn wind.
> The waves toss a zizania seed, over sunken clouds as black:
> Dew on the calyx chills the lotus, red with dropped pollen.
> Over the pass, all the way to the sky, a road for none but the birds.
> On rivers and lakes, to the ends of the earth, one old fisherman.[12]

A close reading of "Autumn Meditation #7" reveals the author's profound ambivalence towards China's remote history. The K'unming Pool scene described by Tu Fu recalls the military grandeur of the Han dynasty. In the first couplet, the author envisions banners which appear "before my eyes"; Tu Fu sees the glory of the Han emperor in this

"monument" to his military might. However, there is a dramatic shift in the second couplet, in which Vega threads her loom "in vain," and the gigantic whale's fins "veer" or move uselessly in the wind. This scene takes on a pathetic quality, displaying the ultimate impotence of these towering monuments. Details such as the moon, a symbol of lasting permanence, and the autumn wind, a symbol of decay, death and regret, provide an ironic contrast to the majesty depicted in the opening couplet.

Images selected by Tu Fu from the natural world are cold, bleak, and even ruthless. The waves of K'unming Pool's waters toss a zizania seed; clouds are black and sunken. Dew, a symbol of transience, chills the lotus, which is "red with dropped pollen," suggesting suffering and loss, or missed opportunity. The scene described in the final couplet is deserted: "Over the pass, all the way to the sky, a road for none but the birds." There are no human figures in sight, and the only evidence of humanity, specifically the road, is frail, tiny, and tenuous. The final line underscores this loneliness and isolation: "On rivers and lakes, to the ends of the earth, one old fisherman."

Images are similarly used in "Spring Night in the Imperial Chancellery", translated by David Hawkes in *A Little Primer of Tu Fu*. The poem goes as follows:

> Evening falls on palace walls shaded by flowering trees, with cry of birds flying past on their way to roost. The stars quiver as they look down on the myriad doors of the palace, and the moon's light increases as she moves into the nine fold sky. Unable to sleep, I seem to hear the sound of the bronze-clad doors opening for the audience, or imagine the sound of bridle-bells borne upon the wind. Having a sealed memorial to submit at tomorrow's levee, I make frequent inquiries about the progress of the night.[13]

In this poem, images are used to express the author's ambivalence as he waits for the morning to arrive, at which time he must present a "sealed memorial" to the emperor. The first images are used to set the scene: "Evening falls on palace walls" locates the poet at the Imperial Palace, "flowering" trees expresses the full splendor of the author's palatial surroundings. The "cry of birds" represented by an onomatopoeia--*"jiu jiu"*--in the Chinese) also contributes to an atmosphere of noise and flurry, of preparation. In the second couplet, the stars and moon are used to express the emperor's magnificence: the stars "quiver" as they face the "myriad doors" of the palace, suggesting the trembling of the emperor's minions in his presence. The moon's brilliance "increases" as it moves through the sky, suggesting the powerful bearing of the emperor.

The third couplet, using discursive language, states plainly that the author is unable to sleep. Instead, he is imagining sounds in the night. The sounds he imagines, the opening of the great hall doors, the bridle-bells of the officials arriving and dismounting on their way to the morning audience, are specifically chosen by the poet to again conjure up images of grandeur. In the final couplet, Tu Fu states in baldly discursive language what his purpose at the palace is this: to submit a sealed memorial at the next day's morning audience. Such a task would naturally cause him to feel uneasy--those serving in the court of the emperor were often exiled or executed. It comes as no surprise to find out in the final line that he frequently rises to ask about the progress of the night.

This poem in its entirety expresses the author's anxiety, uncertainty and sleeplessness as he faces his duties. Rather than directly stating his emotions, Tu Fu couches them in terms of image. The images--the flurry of birds, the "quivering stars", the "increasing" moon, and the imagined bridle-bells--contribute to the mood of unease. This is a good example of the distinctly Chinese convention of transferring intense human emotion to non-human objects.

As we examine the credo of the Imagist poets in conjunction with these Chinese lyric poems by Tu Fu, we find the principles have little correlation to the dynamics of Chinese poetry. For example, the first and second points, "To use the language of common speech," and "To create new rhythms--as the expression of new moods" do not apply to Tu Fu's work. Tu Fu wrote in strict 8-line pentasyllabic verse, using an eloquent poetic vocabulary with fixed idioms. The "sunken clouds" and "autumn wind" are examples of stock poetic phrases which communicate feelings of despair to the Chinese reader. The third point, "To allow for absolute freedom in the choice of subject," cannot be applied to Chinese poetics either, because poets operated with in a strict set of conventions, prizing imitation and subtle transformation over individuality and originality.

When the Imagists discuss "image" in the fourth point, they assert: "We believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities." However, in Tu Fu's poetry we can see many shades of meaning. When he employs an image such as "waves tossing a zizania seed," or "one old fisherman," these images are not precisely described, nor is their meaning immediately accessible. In another of his most famous poems, "Setting Down My Thoughts While Traveling at Night," he includes images of "fine grass" blown on a bank, and the "high mast" of a single boat alone in the night, and yet these images are not clearly defined--they have layer upon layer of meaning. It is even unclear how a man on a boat in the river could perceive "fine grass" blown faintly on a bank in the dark of night!

Stephen Owen in his book on Chinese poetics refutes the fifth point: "To produce poetry...that is never blurred or indefinite." Owen defends the Chinese poetic language as having "full stylistic range, from poems that move with easy clarity to truly ambiguous poems in which the reader is unable to grasp the problematic relations between words."[14] In the poems by Tu Fu examined above, even determining the poet's perceptive presents difficulties, as is made clear by the lack of a clear narrative center, or a point from which the speaker is observing. This is in part due to the lack of pronouns in classical Chinese poetry, which definitely contributes to its "blurred" and "indefinite" nature--the opposite of what the Imagists were aiming for.

The final point in the Imagist credo is: "Concentration of the very essence in poetry." The Imagists had the misconception that Chinese poetry was truncated and terse--probably as a result of poor translation. Owen points out some distinction between the Imagist ideal and the reality of Chinese poetry when he writes: "A gloss translation into English of a poem by Po Chu-yi may sound like the imagist avant-garde of the early twentieth century, but the same poem probably struck a T'ang reader as the most delightfully rambling loquaciousness."[15]

As a final step in this investigation, we will observe several examples of Imagist texts, by William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), to draw some partial conclusions about the Imagist debt to Chinese poetics. The following is a poem by William Carlos Williams, written in the Imagist tradition:

This Is Just to Say[16]

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving

for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

In this poem, the poet employs a simple domestic setting, that of plums set aside for the morning meal, to express the complex emotional labyrinth of marital life. He depicts the battle between husband and wife in which one partner, through seemingly insignificant and trivial actions, can cut his lover to the core. In this poem, the man's voice sounds casual and light, and the reader can almost imagine this text as a note tacked up on a refrigerator in a cozy domestic scene. However, in the final stanza, the tone of easy familiarity takes on a darker tone: "Forgive me/they were delicious/so sweet/and so cold." Here Williams's choice of the adjectives "sweet" and "cold," used to describe the plums, are also indicative of the poet's "cold" and antagonistic attitude toward his lover. In addition, his statement "Forgive me" rings hollow and insincere. He seems to inflict pain with awesome nonchalance. It is this element of politeness and decorum disguising evil which makes the poem "This Is Just to Say" so striking.

Williams's poem entitled "Poem" is playful about what a poem should be.

Poem

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

This is an orthodox Imagist poem, using no discursive language--only image. The poem describes the motion of a cat, using soft, staccato lines to capture the animal's movements perfectly: "carefully/then the hind/stepped down" etc. This poem seems to carry the Imagist tradition to its creative limit: it uses language not to communicate a thought, but to conjure up an image and an atmosphere--a vignette.

Ironically, this poem is written in a style that was probably modeled on Pound's idea of the Chinese ideogram. Like a Chinese calligrapher, Williams sketches the most important details with a few strokes of a pen. The power of image is directly proportional to the concision with which the image is evoked. In the Imagist poem, as in the ideogram, the act of representation is foregrounded--Williams is drawing an outline.

Another of his poems, "The Red Wheelbarrow", seems almost a mockery of Imagism:

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

This is imagism pushed to its limit. This poem brings to mind an elite artist (or filmmaker) creating a perfect scene. His appreciation of the scene is such an intense aesthetic experience that it is almost painful. The writer's entire sense of achievement rests on the presence, and relationship, of these three particular elements in the scene: a wheelbarrow, rainwater, and chickens. This poem seems to mock the poet, and poets in general, by implying that "so much" depends on a seemingly insignificant object--a red wheelbarrow. Because the writer is unwilling to see the scene change, instead emphasizing the notion that fate somehow hangs in the balance of these three items, the artist's obsessive streak is revealed. The poet has an unbalanced or neurotic attitude towards the image, towards art in general.

These three poems exercise freedom in their choice of subject and use the language of common speech according to the Imagist credo, but as products of twentieth century American psychology, they have little in common with the Chinese poetic tradition examined earlier. Poems such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" may appear on the page visually similar to a Chinese poem in translation, but this is more due to a confused Western perception of Chinese poetics than to any link between the two traditions. Further ways in which the Imagists misunderstand or falsely represent Chinese poetics include the use of "free verse" techniques (Chinese classical poetry is generally of a strict, fixed meter), and the rejection of convention in terms of both image and sentiment.

While the Imagists do owe a certain debt to Chinese poetics, their understanding of the reality of the Chinese tradition remains debatable. As we have seen above, Pound and Lowell misunderstood the Chinese tradition at the outset, and created an art form based on their misapprehension. As a result, the six principles of Imagist poetry no longer have any connection to the Chinese poetics they claim as a source. Instead, Imagist poets such as Pound in "Metro" and William Carlos Williams in "Poem" write superficial imitations of what they perceive to be "Chinese." It makes for interesting poetry, but it has nothing to do with Tu Fu. Taiwan students in the literature classroom are quick to notice this discrepancy, which makes for an interesting and challenging point of departure for comparative literary study.

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[1] A complete selection of the Imagists can be found in J. Howard Woolmer's *A Catalogue of the Imagist Poets by J. Howard Woolmer* (New York: J. H. Woolmer, 1966).
[2] John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981), 18.
[3] Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1934), 42.
[4] Alexander W. Allison, and Herbert Barrows, et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), 575.
[5] This is discussed extensively in Daniel Newton Tiffany's *Radio Corpse: Imagism and the Cryptaesthetic of Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995).
[6] For more information, see Ming Hsieh's *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry: Cathay, Translation, and Imagism.* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), especially 25-42.
[7] Pound, 21.
[8] Pound, 21.
[9] A. C. Graham, *Poems of the Late T'ang* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1977), 18.
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[11] Glenn Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1931), 39.
[12] David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 37.
[13] Hawkes, 59.
[14] Stephen Owen. *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985), 27.
[15] Owen, 127.
[16] This and the following examples of Williams' poetry are quoted from Alexander W. Allison, and Herbert Barrows, et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983).

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